

Karski Event at the Senate, February 14

Good afternoon. First of all I would like to thank the Senate for inviting me here today, especially Senator Bogdan Klich, Deputy Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and Andrzej Person, Chairman of the Committee for Immigration and Contacts with Poles abroad. I would also like to thank Professor Adam Rotfeld; Robert Kostro, Director of the Museum of the History of Poland; Wanda Urbanska, Director of the Jan Karski US Centennial Campaign; and Ewa Wierzynska, Director of “Jan Karski: The Unfinished Mission,” also of the Museum of the History of Poland. Thank you all for being here today, it’s a pleasure to be with you.

Trudno mi o Janie Karskim powiedzieć coś, czego państwo nie wiedzą. Jestem pewien, że mógłbym się od was jeszcze wiele dowiedzieć.

Wiem jednak na pewno, że dziedzictwo Jana Karskiego jest teraz, w tym stuleciu, tak samo ważne jak w poprzednim. Widzę to w życiu zawodowym jak i prywatnym.

[There's probably not a lot about Jan Karski I can tell you that you don't already know. I'm certain there is much I can learn from you. What I do know is that Karski's legacy is as important in this century as it was in the last. This I know professionally and also personally.]

In the United States, Jan Karski is known and honored as the intrepid “Courier from Warsaw” – the man who faced unimaginable personal risk to convey his first-hand witness of the horrors of the Holocaust to President Roosevelt and the U.S. government. Seen from the American side of the Atlantic, Karski’s story was too horrible to believe. And yet, the unassailable confidence the Polish government-in-exile had in his integrity and veracity opened the door to the Oval Office to this modest, straightforward man.

Following the War, the terrible accuracy of Karski's information was confirmed time and again, and he made it his life's mission to do everything in his power to ensure that the events he reported would never be repeated. His own personal integrity allowed him to serve as a constant reminder to the world at large that human freedom and dignity are values that must be protected with vigilance. His influence in the U.S., particularly in the foreign affairs community, was enormous. Today, it would be impossible to count the number of U.S. government and political leaders who carry with them an indelible personal memory of their encounters with Jan Karski and his invocation to them to stand up to tyranny to protect the rights and dignity of others.

I was a student at Georgetown University in the 1980s, the same university where Jan Karski spent nearly forty years as a faculty member, influencing thousands of American students over the decades, including future President Bill Clinton.

Although I never crossed paths with Karski in person, I have heard many stories about the countless lives he touched during his time in the U.S. Today, influenced by Jan Karski's legacy, Georgetown offers a Certificate in Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Even in my own career, much of which I have devoted to figuring out how the international community can stop genocide in today's world, I recognize Karski's influence, and the work he did to make sure that we never forget the lessons of the Holocaust.

I'm proud to say that the US Embassy did not forget. In 2007, we inaugurated the Jan Karski Freedom award, which honors Poles who have made outstanding contributions to democracy and human rights. Through the Jan Karski Freedom award, we accomplish two major goals. First, we keep the memory and the legacy of Jan Karski alive in the minds of Americans and Poles alike, honoring our nations' shared commitment to liberty and human dignity. Second, we recognize that there is always more to do, that there are always outstanding individuals working hard to advance human rights in today's world.

We presented our first Karski Freedom award to President Lech Wałęsa, for his leadership within Solidarity, and the critical role he played in seeing Poland through the transition from communism to the thriving democracy we see here today. Our second Karski Freedom award went to Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Solidarity activist and Poland's first post-communist Prime Minister, who also worked on behalf of German-Polish as well as Polish-Jewish reconciliation. Subsequently, we recognized World War II heroes Marek Edelman, for his wartime heroism and lifelong leadership, and Barbara Skarga, for her own wartime heroism, as well as lifetime of philosophical writing and reflections on freedom, power, and relationship between politics and morality. I look forward to announcing our 2012 recipient of the award in the days to come.

Za kilka dni ogłosimy, kto otrzyma nagrodę w tym roku.

[And, in a few days, I will announce this year's winner.]

As most of you know, 2014 will mark the centennial of Karski's birth. The Embassy intends to work closely with the U.S. Centennial Campaign to honor Karski's legacy in both Poland and the United States. I consider myself lucky to be able to work with all of you as we pursue our common goal to keep Jan Karski's memory alive for generations to come. Thank you, once again, for inviting me here today, and thank you for the work you do.